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# THE CIVIL SERVICE EXAMINATION FOR THE NURSES OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, NEW YORK CITY

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*New York City*

The large and important body of public health nurses who are assigned to service in the Department of Health of New York City receive appointment only after submitting to a civil service examination, and passing it successfully. The pre-requisites to this examination as printed in the public notice are, that candidates must be registered nurses, between the ages of twenty-one and forty years, citizens of the United States, and residents of the state of New York.

The Civil Service Commission does not deem that the holding of a state registration certificate is sufficient guarantee of the applicant's fitness for public health work, and this supposition is absolutely logical. The test for the R.N. degree presumes on instruction in all of the basic subjects of the profession, but does not consider specialization. A nurse holding a state registration certificate is supposed to be a well-qualified, all-round nurse capable of developing along any line that may legitimately fall to her lot. This fact does not offer assurance that, at the time of her application, she is fitted for any one particular field. It is upon this premise that the Civil Service Commission has insisted upon a specialized examination for nurses who have sought appointment in the Health Department of New York City.

A further consideration of the analogy between the state and civil service examinations brings out the following thought. The state examination is practically a permit to practise, for, whether we have a mandatory law or no, it is true that the demand for the R.N. degree, as a qualification for application to desirable positions, is now very general. The public knows what state registration stands for, and is steadily increasing its demands for it. The nurse who fails in her state examination is therefore barred from the most promising things in her profession, and her three years of training are more or less lost to her. This fact should be borne in mind by all examiners if they would deal wisely and justly in this still unsettled period. They must bear in mind that we have not yet perfected our courses of training, and that our best graduates are still mere fledglings. When evidence of probable further development of an individual is present, the examiner has not only the right but the solemn duty to give it consideration. This is not so in a later examination for specialized work like that

which we are considering in this article. Here we have nurses who have passed the first test, older women who have looked over the field of the profession and have made their choice. They should be weighed more severely. The examination should be more difficult and the rating less lenient because its purpose is to select the fittest, to discover from amongst the group those who are especially adapted to carry on this important work with wisdom and sincerity. Failure in the civil service test does not throw the applicant out of the nursing work, she still has other lines to follow for which she may be better adapted and in which she may yet attain eminence. All of these facts were borne in mind in framing the questions and in rating the answer papers of the recent civil service examination in New York. At the same time it was also remembered that there had been no announcement of a radical change, and so it was planned to follow in general the old lines, and to make only a few changes that would serve to suggest the future.

We agreed to take the responsibility of the examination upon condition that its character might be changed in two particulars. In the first place, we felt that overlapping of the Regents' examination should be carefully avoided. Registration is one of the pre-requisites to civil service and hence it was obviously unnecessary to repeat that process. Moreover, public health questions are touched upon so lightly in the New York State examination that they are practically overlooked there, hence this phase of a nurse's preparation needed investigation. Therefore we suggested questions based less on strictly professional facts and more on those that relate to public health matters. We conceived that, in order to fulfill its mission as a real fitness test, the examination should portray a nurse's ability to apply professional facts to the community's need. It should also discover her conception of her responsibility, and her general intelligence in questions of civic health protection. In the second place, we stipulated that there should be an examination in the procedures that the school nurse, the infant welfare nurse, and the nurse for preventable diseases would be most likely to use, and this we also felt should disclose a finer knowledge of certain treatments along special lines that would naturally fall to her to perform.

These suggestions were accepted by the commission, and it was the privilege of the writer to conduct the examination last spring. The following remarks are based upon the observations that were made at that time.

The examination, which took place in March and April, 1916, was divided into three parts, namely:

1. Evidence of training and experience.
2. Written test.
3. Test in practical procedures.

The first point, evidence of training and experience, was weighed by the facts set forth in the application form. General education was considered with reference to its bearing upon the subject. A nurse with a speaking knowledge of several languages was credited for that fact. A business training had value, and an applicant who had had the cultural advantage of a college education was rated higher in that point than the one who had had only the minimum requirement of one year of high school. But the valuation accorded to these facts was frequently overbalanced by training and experience. For instance, graduation from a nurse training school which pays especial attention to public health matters was considered worthy of a higher mark than that from some other school which omitted this field of preparation, even though it might give excellent opportunities along other lines. If, on the other hand, public health matters were omitted from the curriculum of the school, the point might still be gained by post-graduate study, or by experience with a visiting nurse or other similar organization. Therefore, those who had made preparation for the work by special study were given a higher per cent than those who had considered themselves fitted by the possession of a diploma from a training school of the minimum standard. The highest per cents for this aspect of preparation were given to those who had graduated from schools giving public health training, and who had had, furthermore, a sufficient interest in and appreciation of their needs to cause them to enter upon a course of study in one of the numerous institutions that now offer opportunities designed to fill just such gaps. It is regrettable that all schools of nursing have not yet included the elements of these subjects in their courses, for it is obviously to their advantage to fit nurses for this important and rapidly growing field of activity.

In framing the questions of the written test, an effort was made to ascertain whether the nurse had a knowledge of the conditions which she was to meet, and whether she had general information concerning allied agencies in New York City.

The questions were as follows:

1. How may her social condition affect a tuberculous patient of the working class? In your answer, state three ways in relation to each of the following; (a) an incipient case; (b) an advanced case.

11. State briefly five points of instruction that you would give to a pregnant woman as regards her care of herself.

III. How would you describe to a tenement house mother the kind of milk she should secure for a bottle-fed baby?

IV. Define (a) Pasteurized milk; (b) Modified milk.

V. Outline a simple, fairly economical diet for a child of 8 years.

VI. What is meant by the term "mouth breather?"

VII. Give the name of—(a) a non sectarian relief society in New York City; (b) a Roman Catholic relief society in New York City; (c) a Jewish relief society in New York City.

VIII. Give name and general location in New York of: (a) four general hospitals; (b) two obstetrical hospitals; (c) two hospitals for contagious diseases; state whether each has an ambulance service.

IX. At what age may children in New York City legally leave school and go to work?

X. What is caries of the teeth? Mention two predisposing causes of caries. Mention two preventive measures.

In spite of the poor wording of the first question, for which we apologize, it brought out an interesting point. As it was misunderstood, many papers gave clear and definite answers to (a) and (b) from the purely medical standpoint alone. The treatments which they gratuitously outlined showed a consideration of the conditions with which their private patients had probably been surrounded. They failed absolutely to understand what was meant by "social condition" in any broader application of the term. So generally was this true that we may not pass it by without comment. Several took "social" to refer to evening parties, afternoon teas and the like, and they enlarged upon the subject by saying, that, "it is a very good thing for incipient cases to have social life, even though it tires them for the time. Illness is depressing and, especially in tuberculosis, the patient should be kept in a cheerful frame of mind."

The test in practical procedures was perhaps the most elucidating. The questions were divided into groups of five each, one group serving for one single half-day. Of these five questions, two were oral and allowed the examiner to draw out latent knowledge of public health matters in general without requiring any one definite fact. The subjects were introduced in this way with a definite purpose. It was recognized that their entrance into the examination was an unannounced innovation and hence it seemed only just to the nurse to give her the benefit of the help in thought stimulation that could be supplied by the examiner through the medium of conversation.

The demonstrations in this division of the examination were hard to adjust. As the subject was specialized to the work of the Department of Health in New York City, and as this embraces only the three branches mentioned above, the field was contracted.

All of that wonderful opportunity for makeshifts in bed-side work that is the especial pride of visiting nurses was eliminated, and the attention was focused upon the details of the care of the eye, ear, nose, throat, teeth, infant feeding, etc. There was good ground for demanding expert emergency work, and therefore questions were inserted to test that side of a nurse's powers. The following three groups, taken from the questions in practical procedures, are selected at random, and are inserted here merely to indicate the type of questions of which the examination consisted.

1. (Oral) What measures do cities take in order to protect their milk supply? Make special reference to New York City.

2. (Oral) How would you dispose of garbage if nursing a patient in a single room in a furnished-room house, in warm weather when the garbage is collected once a day?

3. Improvise method of care of tubercular sputum in the home of the poor.

4. Demonstrate mechanical removal of nits from the hair.

5. Demonstrate application of triangular bandage.

1. (Oral) What do you conceive to be the responsibilities of the school nurse, the infant welfare nurse and the nurse for preventable diseases?

2. (Oral) Describe home applications of heat and cold.

3. Demonstrate putting drops in eyes.

4. Demonstrate lifting and moving patient with fractured femur.

5. Demonstrate emergency treatment for broken finger.

1. (Oral) What provision is there in the New York public school system for the abnormal child?

2. (Oral) A woman with three children, wife of a day laborer living in two rooms in a New York tenement house, is about to be confined. Would you advise her to go to a maternity hospital for her delivery or to remain at home? Give reasons for your decision.

3. Make selection from assortment of patented milk-bottle caps. Give reasons for choice.

4. Demonstrate care of fainting person in a crowd.

5. Demonstrate removal of patient from "live wire."

Some interesting things came to light through this division of the examination, and some that gave cause for serious thought. We wondered how it had come to pass that some nurses had desired to enter a service in which infant feeding plays a large part, and yet had not the slightest conception of how the milk, upon which those very infants were to depend, was guarded from contamination, or, indeed, that there were any protective measures at all, and we asked ourselves if it was too much to expect that one seeking a post as school nurse should know, at least in a sketchy way, what especial attention is given to the abnormal child in New York's public schools.

Viewed in the retrospect, the results were illuminating, and left the examiners with the conviction that nurses are seeking to enter the public health field with inadequate training for the ground they will be expected to cultivate. How can the farmer who knows nothing of the soil of his farm expect to reap a harvest? And how can a nurse dream that she can improve the health of her district if she does not understand the living conditions of the people to whom she is sent as a missionary?

The fact that the municipal nurses in New York City have done fine work in the past and have built a foundation of ideals for others to follow is evidence of the quality of the material that they have controlled and that they still have with them. We urge an examination for all public health nurses in order that the energy and force of executive staffs may be conserved by the elimination of nurses untrained for this branch of work before they have blocked the wheels of the machinery. The only radical cure for the trouble lies with the training schools. If the nursing profession is to accept this challenge to guard the public health, and is not to allow the opportunity to pass on to other hands, perhaps not yet in evidence, but just as surely near and ready to take it up, then those who are educating nurses must consider ways to include this branch of study in their curricula.

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"The mortality from cancer could be reduced considerably if the average person know how to take care of himself. It is not a 'blood disease,' it is not a disease which people have any reason to be ashamed of. So far as physicians can tell it is not brought on by ill health or food. It comes to healthy persons, the healthy man or the healthy woman, but if the simple, easily-noticed warnings be heeded, the task becomes comparatively easy and the only miracle we have to perform is to educate a million people where we now educate one."—*Joseph C. Bloodgood, M.D.; read at the Cancer Symposium of Section K of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, December 30, 1916.*